

God Moves... Out of the Tomb

Part 7 of Sermon Series: *God Moves...*

a sermon based on

Luke 24:1-12

(with reference to 1 Corinthians 15:19-26)

and delivered on

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“A bank in Binghamton, New York had some flowers sent to a competitor who had recently moved into a new building. There was a mix up at the flowers shop, and the card sent with the arrangement read, ‘With our deepest sympathy.’ The florist, who was greatly embarrassed, apologized.

“He was even more embarrassed when he realized that the card intended for the bank was attached to a floral arrangement sent to a funeral home in honor of a deceased person. That card read, ‘Congratulations on your new location.’”¹

That could have really been a “Hell” of a mistake depending on the whose funeral. But then again, not too many people send flowers to “those” funerals. But I digress – and way too early.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, James’ mother Mary, and the other women went to the tomb that morning to continue their morning – to wallow in their grief. They’d come take care of Jesus’ corpse. They’d brought the accoutrements for the task – even though (as we heard on Friday) that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had already wrapped prepared him for burial according to Jewish custom and had used over one hundred pounds of myrrh and spices.

But those men had been in a hurry. We’re even told that they found the first empty tomb they could to lay his body within. So we don’t know exactly what these women hoped to accomplish. Were they there to do it right? Were they there with the intention of moving his body to another – more appropriate – tomb? If so, maybe that was some of their confusion. Had someone beaten them to it? But how could that be – it was too early in the morning. This was the morning after the Sabbath not some ordinary Sabbath, but one of those days when Passover actually fell on the Sabbath. (Sort of like those times when Christmas falls on Sunday). No one among Jesus’ followers would have violated the Sabbath to move him. Would they? These women were there at the first opportunity. Is that why (according to John’s account) confuses Jesus who is standing right in front of her presuming him to be a gardener when she asks, “Sir if you have carried him away, tell me where... (so that I can put him where he belongs)”?(Jn 20:15) {aside} A little bit of a paraphrase.

These women expected sympathy in their grief. They weren’t expecting to find the tomb empty and a card proclaiming “Congratulations on your new location.” But that’s what they found. It confused them. It confused Peter and John who ran down to the tomb to check it out (Jn 20:3-9) I’ve wondered before whether they were filled with hope instead of dismay. But... We hear that they were huddled in a locked house that night for fear of the religious leaders. All of them wondering “What now? We can’t even have a proper funeral or burial?”

Seems ironic, doesn’t it? Of course that’s only because we do know the rest of the story.

But don’t we do the same things in our lives. Don’t we get stuck in mourning or grief – not just over the death of those whom we love – but stuck in our mourning and grief over other losses or failures? We might even feel guilty for moving on. For some people it means hanging on to the things belonged to someone, even if they’re getting in the way of life now. Sometime it means hanging on to destructive relationships or clinging to our youthful aspirations so that we can’t experience the joy of accomplishment.

Guess what? I wanted to be an astronaut. When I started college I studied theoretical computer science and I tried to join the Marines as an aviator. I’m not an astronaut. A congenital birth defect kept me out of the Marines; and I discovered that computer engineering was not my calling. If I were to have measured my life on those things, I’d be stuck. My computer programming training allows me to do some things in my ministry that other pastor’s can’t.

That’s true for all of us. It’s true for our world that seems so often to be resigned to the notion that suffering and poverty will just persist and that our goal should be to merely mitigate

the effects. It even seems as if we've resigned ourselves to accept the incivility that is proliferating in our public discourse.

As individuals and as a culture – we find ourselves stuck in our misery – so much so that we might just be offended if we were to receive a note of congratulations.

But Jesus says, “To hell with that.” (I mean that literally) To hell with that attitude.

{aside} We'll be reciting the Apostle's Creed in just a few moments, I have to admit that I like the older version where we proclaim that Jesus descended into hell rather than merely descended to the dead. Jesus didn't just conquer death. He conquered the power of hell. When he came out of that tomb it wasn't just so that we could have life after death, but so that we can claim life now – to liberate us from our living hells.

In the Resurrection, Jesus completed what he'd already been doing. He'd freed the man possessed by a legion – that's five thousand demons – from his personal hell. For that woman who was trapped in an isolating hell by her perpetual bleeding – he blessed her after she dared to reach out and touch him. He healed lepers, the blind and deaf. He brought back a young daughter and a widow's son from death. He called Lazarus out of his tomb when he'd already been in there four days. Neither that girl or man or Lazarus are walking among us today. They died again, but not until they lived the days that Jesus had given them.

When Jesus moved out of that tomb he didn't linger. He moved away from it. He spent time meeting with his disciples. Just that first day, he greeted Mary Magdalene in the garden; he met the disciples in that locked room, and walked with Cleopas and the other on that road to Emmaus. In the coming days, he would meet them in Galilee and show himself to five hundred believers, so that they would know that hell and death have been defeated and that the only power they have over us is the power we give them.

Unlike Lazarus and the others who were reanimated into life but later died, Jesus didn't. He ascended into heaven so that we might know he continues to live for us. I wonder if he got that card congratulating him on his new location.

I don't want to suggest that we just put on rose colored glasses to overlook the problems in our world and in our lives. That's not healthy; and it's not realistic.

But that same Jesus who didn't wait for the blind man to get to heaven to bless him – that same Jesus who spared that woman caught in the midst of her sin without condemnation but with grace – that same Jesus – who invited not only normal fishermen to be his apostles but a tax collector and a renegade, as well – that same Jesus who vanquished the power of so many personal hells – THAT same Jesus – is inviting each of us and all of us together to notice that he's still alive and to grasp the magnitude of what that means. That is – that when we move out of our tombs – those places and attitudes that keep us from living and loving – from forgiving and for blessing – when we do that – we might just be able to see him in our midst.

Today, Jesus calls us to life. He calls us to life abundant. He calls us to life forever. He calls us for life in this moment. All we have to do is to accept the gift and to trust him. When we do death and hell have no power over us to steal the joy of our accomplishments.

In Jesus, God moved out of the tomb to congratulate us on our new location, because in him we are citizens of heaven living no longer as residents of this world but as expatriates revealing his glory to the world.

He is risen! He is risen indeed.
Alleluia. AMEN.

¹ *Our Daily Bread*, May 25, 1992. Retrieved from <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/12761/death-by-james-chandler?ref=TextIllustrationSerps>.